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On Being a Lone Parent: A Reflective Story
Paper to the Athlone Anti-Poverty Network Seminar
February, 2005

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My name is Liz and I have been a lone parent for 14 years. I am here today to speak as a lone parent with regard to poverty.

I am sure there is no need to tell you money is a problem when you are bringing children up on your own. Personally, I received good support from the organisations I have approached. Saying that, I had to push really hard to achieve this. I honestly feel that the awareness of Lone Parent entitlements in Ireland is lacking in general. I only found out about them because I followed every avenue starting with social welfare. My feelings on this are, therefore, 'if you don't ask you don't get'. But where do you go? It's not just all about Social Welfare. That is just the beginning of the up hill struggle.

You are given a weekly payment to live on that somebody somewhere has decided is enough. To me, going to social welfare was degrading in itself. It meant I had hit rock bottom. This made me feel poor as I had grown up in a fairly middle class environment. As far as I was concerned approaching social welfare then was an embarrassment, and just showed you could not be bothered to look for work, whether you had a child or not.

Last year a parent who had never wanted for anything in her life was left on her own with a child and no income. She was very brave and approached social welfare, she filled in all the forms did all the right things and then had to wait for her application to be accepted. She was told this would take weeks and therefore she would have to go to the Community Welfare Officer to get a payment every week. This was what she could not bear to do, she did not want to queue for money every week. It made her feel at her lowest so she lived on nothing and got in arrears until her application came through. Embarrassment made her choose poverty.

For me now I live on my lone parent payment (which I fully believe is an unrealistic amount). This is topped up with my payment from community employment so I can just manage - but this is only because I do not need child care because my children are in secondary school. A lone parent with younger children would find it much harder, a lone parent a couple of years ago, was left with a £300 mortgage a month and two children aged 1 and 2. After paying this mortgage she had to survive on £90 a week to pay for electric, heating food and clothes etc - That is poverty.

Poverty stopped me going to University. As soon as my oldest daughter started school full time and I could get my younger daughter into a crèche I started an Access to University Course in a local college. This, thankfully, did not interfere with my entitlements. I studied hard for a year it kept my mind off money at night and I passed with flying colours. I then found out that the grant I would get would be lower than

my lone parent payment which would be stopped. – That was the end of my dream of getting into university.

Later on, I continually took courses when I could and as I mentioned before I work in community employment which will help me get out to full-time employment in the future. This employment also includes lots of training courses which also do not affect any of my entitlements. But again this is only because my daughters are in secondary school.

You don't have to live on your own to be a lone parent. Having a partner doesn't necessarily mean you are not experiencing poverty. Many parents' stay at home with their children and have no interaction with their partner's at all. It can be left to this parent to bring up the children on their own without any means of support this is a serious case of hidden poverty that needs to be addressed.

Again, I outline the fact that parents on their own with or without a partner would feel the shame of having to ask for help. For instance, a woman in her twenties with a 3 year old and new born child, who was struggling to make ends meet only asked for help when it got to the worst it could get. She had no heating no food and no way of contacting her partner who did not come home for several days, this was her worse case scenario, in the end she fled the home and everyone judged her because at the end of the day no one could see what was happening behind closed doors.

Isolation can often lead to poverty and then again poverty can lead to isolation. Hidden poverty can be as simple as being too proud to ask for help because you have not had to ask before. Being trapped with no money to go anywhere or do anything, this will also have a knock on effect on the children.

When the girls were young I was not someone who liked to sit in on their own and I wasn't very comfortable in my own company. I could not afford a babysitter and therefore I continually stayed in. I found it especially hard when the children were in bed early at night. I thought I had cured this by going visiting with the girls but it ended up me being out all the time at a late hour and no one ever came to see me.

It is, I realise, a very individual thing and we all have to deal with it in different ways. This would be the time when the realisation of poverty would hit; too much time on my own made it a worse burden to bear. I am finally learning to like my own Company and I am so busy I don't have too much time to feel lonely. I feel I have come a long way in 14 years and am very proud that I did it all on my own.